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Economic buzzwords boost pitch newsworthiness

By Christine Kent
chrisk@ckeditorial.com

Will the words 'cheaper gas' lure a journalist to read your press release?

Are there key words that can ensure your press release or pitch gets noticed by a journalist—or can certain words doom your PR effort to the “Trash” folder? “Viagra,” “free” and “naked” are what the spammers use, but you’re more likely to reap success with words like “economy,” “election” or “Olympics,” which play into current news trends.

Thanks to search engine technology, it’s easier than ever to figure out if your pitches and releases will sink or swim—although you still have to apply old-school PR smarts to create a media-friendly piece of communication.

“The words that get you the best results will be the ones that are most relevant to that particular story, and are most used by the public when they’re searching for that story,” explains Sarah Skerik, vice president of distribution services at PR Newswire.

PR Newswire’s [keyword density tool](#) now helps you test the value of the key phrases and news terms that are most important to a press release. By entering the text in the tool, you can see the content the same way the search engines see it, and adjust key phrases and terms accordingly.

Elizabeth Robinson, founder of [Volume PR](#) in Centennial, Colo., agrees that the best keywords will always be the ones that are attention-getters because of current news events. You can’t focus your news internally, says Robinson, as though your announcement was being made in a vacuum.

Robinson’s firm was charged with getting PR for an annual economic survey from The Alternative Board, a small business coaching organization. In 2007 Volume PR put the survey release over the wire, only to see it flop with just a small handful of media placements.

Last January the PR team realized that the 2008 survey press release had to ratchet up its connection to timely news, using the same words that the media was using to talk about the economy. Since in early January Federal Reserve Chairman Ben S. Bernanke was talking to Congress about the gloomy outlook, the release referred to Bernanke’s testimony, recent predictions about a recession and President Bush’s own pronouncements about consumer confidence.

Voila: The formerly sleepy press release garnered thousands of hits on Google and was covered in several top-tier media outlets, including *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, CNBC and Reuters. “By using those keywords, the release bubbled up to get the media’s attention,” Robinson says.

Both Robinson and PR Newswire’s Skerik point out that simply peppering a release with “keyword spam” doesn’t land you top-tier media coverage; there needs to be some steak behind the sizzle. Without real news, your judicious use of keywords may lure journalists to take a quick look at a pitch or release, but they’ll delete it quickly.

“Now, if you write a boring press release, you make two mistakes: Reporters don’t want to read it, and it won’t turn up in search results,” Skerik says. “Bad press releases have always been ‘don’ts’—now they are ‘double don’ts.’”

Assuming your release or pitch is solid enough to keep a journalist’s attention once you’ve lured them into reading more, what are the best—and worst—words to give your missive a boost?

Herewith, good (and bad) suggestions from PR pros.

Bad words

Dynamic: Todd Fraser, account director at [Ink Inc.](#) PR in Los Angeles, says this word can sometimes add, well, dynamism, but more often that not, it’s a throwaway. “It reeks of an over-exuberant publicist trying to make something out of nothing,” says Fraser. “It’s proof that adjectives can be both our friends and our enemies.”

Breathtaking: “How many things in this life are truly breathtaking?” asks Stephanie Johnston, senior account supervisor at [E.B. Lane](#) in Phoenix. “The birth of a child, a surprise wedding proposal—yes. But in the real estate-driven market of Phoenix, the word has been thrown around so much PR people think they must include it in their releases. I ask you, have you ever seen a breathtaking strip mall, parking garage or office building?”

Unique: “Either people don’t understand the meaning of the word, or their worlds are, indeed, very small,” says Kyle Elyse

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Niederpruem, president of [Kyle Communications](#) in Indianapolis. Jonathan Morein, director of PR for the Altus Group in Philadelphia, agrees: “If you use the word, you start to sound like you are reaching.”

Web 2.0: This hackneyed tech expression, says Jenny Schmitt, president and “Senior Spark” at [CloudSpark](#) in Atlanta, is getting slapped onto everything that’s got even a tenuous relationship to social networking. “The use of ‘2.0’ is an immediate signal that you’re trying too hard or not relevant,” says Schmitt.

“The media conversations and those of their readers have moved past the 2.0 concept, which from the start created confusion and conveyed very little besides an evolution of product.”

Revolutionary: “I think the media click on ‘delete’ as soon as that word is seen,” says San Jose, Calif.-based high-tech PR consultant Tina Casalino. “I used to work at a very large consumer electronics company, and ever other release used ‘revolutionary.’ Never again!”

Robust: Jeanne Perdue, editor of [Zeus Technology](#) magazine, sees this clunker on a daily basis. “I always delete it, as they never include a valid, third-party measurement of robustness with this claim,” Perdue says. “And if my magazine touts something as robust and somebody buys it and it turns out not to be robust, that would not be good for my own credibility as a technology editor.”

Good words

Largest/Smallest: “As humans we’re hard-wired to note anything that is the largest or the smallest,” says Jenny Schmitt. “Would anyone care about the great white shark, if it was a medium-sized animal? Those key words in a subject line or headline trigger something with journalists who are curious as well.”

Economy/recession/cost savings: Anything that relates to the tough economic climate, PR pros says, will give you an edge—journalists everywhere are looking for angles on the economic pinch. “Hot words right now are ‘recession proof,’ ‘saving’ or ‘on a budget,’” says Yevgeniy Gutsalo, marketing manager for [Corporate Suites Business Centers](#) in New York. “Although it sounds tacky, it works.”

Free: “If it’s free, it’s for me,” cracks John Earnhardt, senior manager of media relations for [Cisco Systems](#). (“Free” is an attractive word, but it can also trigger spam filters, so use with care.)

Bride: “No matter how bleak the economic climate, brides will continue to marry,” says Tony Felice, president of [Tony Felice PR & Advertising](#) in Phoenix. “Often, bridal stories can be evergreen and may have relevance no matter the season.”

Split-decision word

Green: This may be a good word that’s on its way to becoming a bad word. Many PR people say that making a connection to green issues helps a pitch or press release, but some fear that “green” has been so overused that there’s no longer faith in it.

“Now it can refer to anything from organic products and environmentally friendly services, all the way to products that really have no environmental connection whatsoever,” complains Jenn Hoffman, president of the [J Brand Group](#) in Phoenix. “I’m so over green being used and abused!”

Where are you on the ‘Jargon trash index’?
Tom Gable, CEO of Gable PR in San Diego and a former business journalist, is always on the lookout for tired, meaningless words to add to his “hate list.” In fact, he’s come up with an easy way to figure out if you (and your staff) are making too many trips to the jargon well.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take any release and circle the words that appear on the “most hated” list, below. 2. Add the number of words circled. 3. Divide by the number of paragraphs in the release. 4. Multiply by the number of times the word “solutions” is in the release.
Your jargon rating
Less than 1: Very likely editors will read it; good job!
1 to 2: Creeping into Jargon Land, may get read if newsworthy.
3: A candidate for most e-mail filters, unless there are big dollars involved or industry icons.
4: Getting unfit for human consumption, much less media attention.
5: Submit to the <i>Guinness Book of World Records</i> for the coveted Jargon Density Award.
More than 5: Put it in the bottom of your birdcage and start over.
Most hated words
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solutions • Leading • Leading provider • Seamless

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- Mission critical
- Turnkey

Article comments:

Tuesday, July 29, 2008 1:08:46 PM by Susan Barrow

Always delightful to see people who recognize buzzwords as the meaningless BS they are!!

Wednesday, July 30, 2008 8:04:37 AM by Loren Talley

I love the Hate List. Wouldn't it be great if we could enter all the deadbeat words into a new editing software called the 'Cringe Checker?!

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